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The Last Class: Critical Thinking, Reflection, Course Effectiveness, and Student Engagement

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For the past four fall semesters, I have taught a first-year honors seminar to help talented incoming students establish purpose in college, take responsibility for their own education, and make the transition to college-level thinking and writing. My strategy in accomplishing these goals is asking students to analyze the systems through which youth in the United States are processed into college students. We spend fifteen weeks studying intersections of youth and student cultures, college honors populations, and U.S. secondary and higher education systems. The objective is to empower class members to become intentional learners who understand the purpose of liberal education and take action to improve the lives of other young people.

Historically, the last class of the semester has not been materially productive. I experimented with giving course evaluations in class and online, and while I strove to make global connections among units in the course to provide an overview of what we had accomplished, I found that in the final sessions I was doing all the work, which was antithetical to the ethos of a course in which students collaborate to construct knowledge for themselves. Two years ago, all that changed.

This article describes a critical thinking assignment that has proven to be so transformative that I have imported it to other courses; graduates of the seminar named it and refer to it as "The Last Class." It constitutes a metacognitive exercise that requires students to use the critical thinking skills developed in the course to process the educational experience in which they have been mutually and individually engaged. This assignment renders their participation an enactment of precisely the intentional learning we strive to realize all semester.

The course is predicated on the precepts of constructivist learning theory, which posits that learning is best facilitated, or teaching most effective, when students are actively involved in collaborating to make meaning and construct knowledge rather than passively receiving information from a teacher (Marlowe 7). The goals of this educational practice are to foster critical thinking and cultivate motivated, independent learners. Establishing a constructivist learning

environment is sometimes a culture shock for students expecting the teacher-centered, authoritarian, passive learning model with which many enter college.

Having class members actively critique the course they have collaborated to construct is thus a theoretically sound endeavor. Further, they understand participation in the Last Class to be an opportunity for student activism; each member contributes to improving the experiences of students who take the seminar after them. It also constitutes a form of teacher research: the systematic study of an educator's own teaching practice in which educators experiment with methods and analyze the effects in order to improve students' learning (Cochran-Smith 85).

THE LAST CLASS CRITIQUE

In preparation for the final week of classes, the homework assignment is distributed well in advance. For the penultimate period, students are required to reread the first page of the course syllabus before arriving. We spend most of this class discussing the extent to which the course met or failed to meet the stated objectives. This discussion helps students write more informed, thoughtful, and potentially useful responses to the two course evaluations my institution requires and to do so more efficiently in a hectic part of the semester, when time is at a premium and surveys for others are of less importance than preparing for final exams. During this session, I take notes and ask questions, but students do most of the talking. We spend the remainder of the period clarifying and answering questions about the Last Class.

Students are warned that the homework for the Last Class is time-consuming; they are required to review their notes for the entire semester, scan our 700-page course reader, and draft a minimum of one page of legible notes to hand in. Grumbling about workload is effectively checked by the disclosure of the objective: they must come prepared to tear apart and rebuild the course they have nearly completed, to critique every reading, discussion, activity, and writing assignment. I propose that students, who sometimes perceive themselves to be oppressed by larger systems in which they are disempowered, use the skills they have honed to dismantle and rebuild the course as its new masters. I then share examples of improvements initiated by previous years' students from which this year's group has benefitted, so participants understand that their labor has real effects. Members may bring refreshments to fortify themselves for strenuous work that pays off in power to shape other first-year students' experiences. When we read the assignment sheet, heads start nodding; some students begin taking notes spontaneously. Others make plans to gather with friends in the residence halls to discuss proposed revisions. All come to the Last Class ready to roll up their sleeves.

By contrast to the students' labors, the faculty member's preparation is deliberately quick and simple, not least to free time for grading final papers. It entails gathering a writing marker for each student, a pad of poster-sized newsprint, and a roll of masking tape or, if the budget has been generous,

self-stick poster sheets. The intellectual work is limited to drawing up a list of writing prompts.

At the onset of the Last Class, some students set out snacks and the rest tape sheets of paper around the room, far enough apart to give students some elbow room to jot quick answers. I give the markers to the quietest member of the seminar and tell the rest to go ask for a writing utensil, so even the shyest person is crucial to the success of our endeavor. I then assign a one-word prompt for volunteers to write on the top of the hanging pages; this saves the time of preparing the sheets in advance and heightens students' anticipation.

The prompts consist only of the words in bold. Prior to setting students to work, I describe the questions for which each stands. This year, there were eleven prompts:

1. **Readings** (2 poster pages since this is the biggest question)

   Which of our assigned readings did you enjoy? Which did you find valuable for your growth? Which should we keep or "kill"? What articles did you see in our course reader that student discussion leaders or I did not assign, but you wish we had? What additional suggestions do you have for readings we could add to the course?

2. **Units**

   What were the most and least successful units of study? Are the units sequenced in the most effective order? Can you think of a unit that would make the course stronger and more meaningful to first-year students or people studying these issues?

3. **Writing**

   Which of the current assignments should we keep? What are your ideas for new ones? How can the assignments or instruction be revised to help students' writing improve?

4. **Activities**

   What were the most and least successful in-class, transition-to-college, and evening activities?

5. **Suggestions**

   What's your best suggestion for improving our course? What should we keep, and what should we omit? What worked best? What needs minor adjustment?

6. **Favorites**

   What were your favorite things about the course? What were your least favorite parts? Was there anything you disliked but from which you learned something?

7. **Advice**

   What's your best advice for next year's students?

8. **Big Questions**

   What do you think were this course's essential questions? What big questions embedded in the issues we study in this course do you think we failed to identify and/or tackle?

9. **Films**

   What films do you suggest we include for a public series to get the campus talking about the issues we study in our course?

10. **Media**

    Can you recommend additional artifacts or sound or video clips appropriate for kicking off discussions of our readings?

11. **Future**

    Add your name if you want to volunteer to assist with in-class, evening, or transition-to-college programs when the course is offered in the future.

Once students are clear on the questions, they arm themselves with their page of notes, marker, and a snack, then go from poster to poster writing their responses to the prompts. I play music related to the course themes in the background for the twenty to thirty minutes students require to complete the task. At the start of the semester, we listen to "I Love College" by Asher Roth. We deconstruct the misogynistic video and the lyrics glorifying drinks, drugs, and sexual conquests, then talk about the function of anthems. For homework, students send me links to online copies of songs they think would make better college anthems, preferably ones that will help them stay positive in difficult times. I collect the links on our class website, so students can access them all semester. At the Last Class, I play Asher Roth again, which causes groans and laughter, followed by tracks from their compiled playlist of better choices, including my own nomination. What I call "The Honors Song" is really John Butler Trio's "Better Than," the lyrics of which exhort the listener to be "better than" someone who wastes life living in comparison and competition with others. The students often say it speaks to their anxieties.

Despite the fact that they have taken notes in advance, once the students see others' ideas they expand or dispute them on the hanging pages. Participants are discouraged from speaking so that we can discuss what they are seeing emerge after all have had a chance to record their thoughts. Occasionally there are giggles, guffaws, expressions of exasperation, or indications of thoughtful reflection: "Never thought of that" or "I *so* agree!" Our studies of the effects of online social networks on education are validated when members realize and remark that they have unconsciously imported the conventions of that medium into the Last Class critique: when one student records a response with which others concur, many respond by writing the word "like," much as they would click the "Like" button on Facebook.

After students have written their responses, they return to their seats. A student assumes responsibility for one of the posters and reads it for us so we can discern patterns of response and confer for clarification. Participants continue to add to their personal sheet of notes to capture ideas generated during discussion. Though additions are not required, members are eager to exercise as much power as they can and to ensure that their contributions and insights are taken into consideration.

After we have discussed each poster briefly, I ask the students about their experience of having critiqued the course and worked to improve it. This most explicit act of reflexive metacognition enables them to see the structure; to compare the intended objectives with actual results; to make connections to other courses, disciplines and campus institutions; and to determine the potential for evolution within a discrete academic course. This overview of the course repositions students from trekkers among the trees to cartographers high above the forest, mapping the road just taken.

SAMPLE FINDINGS

To give a sense of the range and depth of student responses as well as their value for course revision, I have included select findings from the teacher research yielded by this activity. The prompts for a Last Class critique should be tailored to the course content and learning objectives. Thus the prompts about big questions, films, and media that were appropriate for our course are less so for others, so I have omitted their discussion here. What follows are practical descriptions of how I interpret and use student responses to improve the course and student engagement.

Readings

The first Last Class activity elicited an interesting response; when readings were nominated to be "killed," fierce debates broke out, and quite a few students found themselves arguing for the retention of articles that they actively disliked but that they thought had potential for contributing to students' development and achieving course objectives. I have subsequently asked students to separate pleasure from educational value in assessing the readings. Thus, respondents frequently list titles followed by the words "keep," "like," "love," "hate," or "dislike but keep."

The excerpts we read from John Henry Newman's *The Idea of the University* are regularly tagged "dislike but keep." His arguments about liberal education are couched in nineteenth-century prose that most students find challenging to read, but once we excavate his argument for breadth in academic studies, as opposed to specialized knowledge or majors, students come to appreciate it even if they do not agree. Newman's work becomes a foundational touchstone, as does Mark Edmundson's famous indictment of contemporary college students as emotionally fearful and intellectually lazy in "On Liberal Education as Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students."

By contrast, they passionately advocate retention of the transcripts of three commencement speeches we read toward the end of the semester. All give students practical or philosophical strategies on which to reflect and take action. David Foster Wallace's 2005 speech at Kenyon College exhorted students to "be conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience" (54). Erica Goldson's 2010 valedictorian address went viral on the Internet when she excoriated the system she was being rewarded for mastering and challenged "robotic" student "slaves" to change the American educational system by demanding that learning be cultivated for its own sake and not for the numbing practice of collecting achievements. In Stephen B. Sample's 2010 commencement address, the retiring president of the University of Southern California argued that, if students take the time to answer three simple questions requiring deeply complex answers, they will clarify their values in such a way as to render many of life's difficult choices easier to make.

An article that generates extreme reactions on both sides is worth retaining as a catalyst for informal or structured debate. Titles that regularly generate creative tensions are those that touch on socio-economic class. An excerpted version of Barbara Ehrenreich's "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America," Lars Eighner's essay "On Dumpster Diving," and practically any piece on Affirmative Action or legacy candidates in college admissions will get the fur flying.

Because veterans of the course are solicited for suggestions to add to our course reader, they frequently email or drop off new articles, such as the Goldson valedictorian piece, long after they have completed the Last Class critique. These contributions have proven fruitful in keeping materials current, new class members engaged, and graduates both connected to the course and mindful of the issues we studied together.

Units

Students generally approve of the course units. Based on previous years' responses, I have added, dropped, and condensed units; I have, for example, combined the reading on problems inherent in colleges with those on soaring costs in higher education in order to highlight correlations identified by class members. This year, discussion of "The Wallenda Factor," Warren Bennis's essay on failure, was so powerful that students asked me to develop a complete unit on the subject. They agreed strongly when I asked if honors students are conditioned to be risk-averse and if this fear-based trait hinders personal and intellectual growth. Some students completed an extra-credit writing assignment by contributing a narrative to the online journal *The Failure Project*, which strives to transform the perception of failure from destructive personal tragedy into constructive learning experience Two students' narratives were published online.

Students sometimes suggest that we should "eat dessert first," as one quipped, and study "juicier" units like the one that included the failure essay earlier in the semester. I do not tell them that it is deliberately positioned closer to the end of the term and must be earned, but with reflection most come to understand that the structure of the course builds intellectual and writing skills, as well as trust among class members, that are needed to grapple effectively with the issues in which they are most deeply implicated and thus most eager to explore. If a given unit comes earlier in the course, students are not yet prepared to engage fully. That said, their good suggestion to reposition a unit on youth as agents of change nearer to the beginning of the course will render it a source of early inspiration and get them thinking about their research projects sooner.

Writing

The writing assignments for our seminar can be daunting for first-year students, even those in honors. The chief challenges lie in learning to manage ego, time, and a large project effectively. Confidence in their writing, on which many honors students stake their competence and on which many rely for validation, takes a beating when their first college papers are returned. As Robert Sullivan, director of the Ithaca College Honors Program, counsels during Honors Orientation in September, students find it difficult but important to countenance "round grades" when they are accustomed to receiving only "pointy ones."

Students complain throughout the course about how much writing they have to do. But during the Last Class, four sections in two years came to the same surprising conclusion on the posters: more writing, please. When asked to clarify, they indicated that writing about the readings as well as their chosen research issue fulfilled the intended purpose of improving their understanding, reasoning, and argumentation; they also said that reading what others wrote was instructive for their own writing practice as well as informative and interesting. They requested assignments in genres useful for honors students, like academic abstracts, conference proposals, journaling, an additional paper (!), and more online reading blogs/discussions. The addition of the abstract as part of the research paper assignment is an example of students' small suggestions yielding big improvements for future learners.

In discussion, we weighed the pros and cons of journals and concluded that, since journals are cumbersome, students could keep a record of their intellectual development through the more manageable task of writing a one-sentence position on the issue in their class notes at the start of the period and discovering whether that position evolved over the course of discussion at the end. Next year I will leave two or three minutes at the beginning and end of each class for such note-taking, and one of the poster prompts for next year's students will be a query about the "three-minute journal" to help us determine whether such a short reflection can achieve meaningful results.

The rest of the responses on the Writing poster relate to the research project. With a fifteen-to-twenty-page paper behind them, many express a sense of

accomplishment and pride in their projects, some of which they present on campus, back at their high schools, and at undergraduate research conferences, and all of which entail primary and secondary research and action to improve the lives of young people. On the Advice poster, students offered practical tips for future students to improve the quality of their writing, including:

- Start the research project early.
- Write a page or two a day and leave time to edit.
- Plan to finish 2 to 3 days early so you will actually finish on time.
- For each paper, write a draft, print it out and attack it with a corrective pen. Be merciless!
- Go to the Writing Center/professor/peer mentor for help.
- Proof read out loud. It makes all the difference.
- Don't take the optional extensions on deadlines. They are like crack! Totally addictive! They start a domino effect.

None of these suggestions is particularly innovative, but when next year's students see the actual poster, scrawled by real "survivors," and hear versions of the same pointers from graduates who have been invited back to speak, the advice will have more impact than if tendered by the professor.

Many students also cited an activity conducted at the end of the course and asked that it be moved to the beginning. Whereas students have traditionally been required to review all their papers, identify their three most pressing writing problems, and create a final essay in which they address these three specific problems, respondents suggested that they generate their "hit list" after their *first* paper and then revise it over the course of the term as their writing skills develop. This makes good sense as it will enable them to document progress over time, and I can easily build it into the next syllabus.

The tension between discussion and writing instruction remains; some students seek explicit instruction to help them make the transition to college-level skills whereas others arrive fully fluent in the conventions of college discourse. They claim to want specific lessons but resist yielding discussion time with so many compelling units from which to choose and a finite number of weeks in the term. Some but not all make use of the class's peer mentor (a former student in the class), the Writing Center, and online writing labs. In response to their ongoing frustrations, I plan to implement a weekly mini-lesson derived from their hit lists. For example, if enough students decide, after reading comments on their papers, that they need to work on integrating quotations, I can target that skill in a mini-lesson. I anticipate less resistance if these sessions are built into the syllabus from the start but will not know until the Last Class next fall.

Responses to the writing assignments are not just limited to the Writing and Advice posters. On the Favorites page, class members consistently cite intellectual freedom as one of the best features of the writing assignments and the

course: they must conduct significant primary and secondary research, but the issue they choose to investigate and in which they propose to intervene is one about which they care passionately or feel free to explore. They also cite the first and last writing assignments. The first asks them to reflect on why they are attending college, and the last is a declaration of their philosophy of education; they are thematically linked to enable students to measure the extent to which their beliefs change or solidify over the course of the semester.

Advice

As with the writing tips noted above, responses on the Advice poster go a long way toward improving the professor's and the future students' experience of the course. The most frequent points on which students counseled next year's class were:

- Do the readings, even if we don't get to them in discussion. They tie to other courses and make you understand more deeply.
- Learn for yourself, not for the grade.
- Come to class with an open mind and an opinion. Expect that your opinion may change.
- Have confidence in your educated opinion, but don't be afraid to listen to others'.
- Take what you need and leave the rest.
- Silence [your] fear. Be brave and bold!
- Whatever you do, do it with passion.

These sheets I preserve in their original form and post on the board during the first week of class the next semester.

In-Class Activities

After I model discussion facilitation during the first month to establish the level of intellectual discourse and boundaries for respectful disagreement, students assume leadership of the seminar. They are instructed in a variety of discussion formats, encouraged to vary methods, and urged to create their own. Respondents in the Last Class note the value of variety in discussion methods not least because it serves as a bridge between secondary classrooms offering multiple activities per period and discussion-based college courses typically comprised of one.

Influenced by previous Last Class results, many of this year's discussion leaders strove to incorporate more media and to connect contemporary cultural artifacts and practices to the issues raised in our readings. Their use of video clips, images, music, and news reports to kick off discussions constituted one of the most successful implementations of previous Last Class suggestions and

contributed to the current cohort's perceptions of relevance and applicability to future studies.

In addition to discussion, other valued in-class activities include impromptu debates, workshops on conducting primary and secondary research, and a networking activity for sharing resources and clarifying theses in preparation for writing the research paper. This year's class specifically asked that an informal session be added to share findings once research projects have been completed. They also asked for greater involvement and interaction with graduates of the course, describing the value that these veterans can bring to newcomers' studies. As Melissa Johnson has argued, there is a growing body of evidence that peer mentoring benefits students on both sides of the exchange (189–90). This year's class asked point blank if some discussion modeling in the first third of the course could be conducted by former students in the course and argued for the importance of student leaders to determine content and facilitate discussion in the proposed film series. Such moves will help realize one of the tenets of our honors program: to cultivate active makers of new knowledge, not passive consumers of given information.

Outside-Class Activities

Though students earn course credit for the transition-to-college events required by the first-year experience program of which our seminar is a part, the events themselves are sometimes held on a different day from our discussions. Based on previous Last Class critiques and programs conducted by the Residence Life Division, I successfully replaced a partially redundant panel with one on mental health for honors students entering college. Unlike past years, students were divided on the value of a survey of vocational and academic interests they completed through Career Services; some would prefer an information session on obtaining internships. The survey will stay for at least another year, but in a future class we will consider whether the students' resistance results from student professionalization or fear of a bad economy in which hands-on experience and contacts are perceived as potentially more valuable than alma mater or degree.

Students strenuously advocated retaining the former-student panel offering advice for success in our course; based on their requests, I will add a panel on successful student researchers. Similarly, we will retain the sessions on initiating online registration as well as the brief but memorable discussion of tensions inherent in going home for Thanksgiving; students often discover that they have changed while friends have not, and parents have a baffling and irksome tendency to treat first-year college students as if they are still in high school.

Numerous course obligations outside normal school hours also come under scrutiny. Though Last Class responses are by no means unanimous, these events are typically reviewed favorably. The honors program's retreat for first-year students is a sacrosanct favorite. My students have four additional evening events: two guest speakers who have been invited to our campus; a cross-cultural

simulation game; and a play staged by our theater department. This year's most popular evening activity was the play, which tied to our course thematically. Most students had never had the experience of studying a script, watching the play, and then analyzing the performance in class. Even science majors cited this experience as an enlightening encounter that knitted "book learning" to their lived experience. Students' responses have taught me that the key to an external event's success is relevance, which is best established by helping students make connections among readings, class discussions, other coursework, and campus life.

Favorites

When asked to cite their favorite parts of the course, students are being queried not for the ego gratification of the professor but to ascertain what should be non-negotiable in determining course and syllabus revisions. Since class members especially value intellectual freedom and two written assignments that contribute to the course's coherence, these are the cornerstones on which the academic trajectory is built; beyond these, responses to the question fall into three categories: structure, faculty, and experiential elements.

Among this year's favorite structural components were opportunities to engage in respectful argument; discussion among fewer than twenty peers rather than a large, lecture-format course; and a scaffolded method for reflection and values clarification. Respectful disagreement is established by a stipulation in the syllabus that we will argue but never fight, and discourse is modeled in the first month. When discussants get fearful or lazy and when the analysis is tentative or insufficiently deep, my responsibility is to demonstrate how to get us to the next level. Similarly, when a class member uses language or engages in behavior that is inappropriate to academic discourse, my responsibility is to establish boundaries that protect our learning environment without shaming or shutting down the student. The assignments—formal, informal, summative, and formative—are crafted to help students generate an informed personal philosophy of education; all are predicated on the assumption that students will be more successful in college if they have thoughtful, tested, and fully articulated goals to accompany their analytical and writing skills.

The faculty contributions students cite as favorite parts of the course are professional, not personal. Members consistently value being held to high standards in writing, verbal expression, and reasoning; being pushed to examine uncomfortable issues in which they are personally implicated or invested; and having electronic and in-person access to the professor and peer mentor outside of class.

The third broad category of responses on the Favorites poster consists of "light bulb" moments: experiences of class discussions, late night sessions with roommates, or encounters with readings that changed an individual student's perspective on the issues under consideration in our course. These responses are the least useful for course revision but sometimes the most powerful for students' reflections on what they learned.

Future Involvement

Depending on the year and the section, between 65% and 78% of students ask to be contacted for future involvement in the course; this can mean becoming a highly involved peer mentor, who for a stipend tutors in writing, holds office hours, and conducts some writing and transition-to-college activities. The commitment can be as small as spending one period circulating among and coaching students during a library research session; speaking on a panel about research projects, success in the class, or surviving the first year; or facilitating a cross-cultural simulation game like Barnga or BaFa BaFa in which players are disoriented to cultivate empathy and patience. Integrating eager former students into the initial month of instruction is a possibility worth pursuing.

Course veterans can also participate by critiquing readings for new units. Presently, four are researching articles for the new unit on failure, and twenty-four are gaining practical experience as chapter editors and helping to turn our course reader into a real textbook by assessing and developing study questions for extant units. All will have the chance to co-author a chapter introduction with the professor; all feel they are helping future learners and contributing to the field.

Results

Students profess that the act of systematic, disciplined thinking required by the Last Class critique is pleasurable and gives them a coherent vision of the journey they have just completed. They openly revel in their power as well as their accomplishments. One such student sent an email the day after the most recent critique:

> [P]assed your room yesterday and saw it was last class. Good memories. The posters made me remember last year. Wish my other courses did this. We learned so much and got to see it in black and white. [The course] changed how we look at college. . . . Our group keeps in touch. We have our own page on Facebook. . . . I really enjoyed speaking to the students. Let me know if I can help again next September. (West)

The student's message is revealing on multiple levels as evidence of ongoing engagement with the issues in the course; commitment to activism and continuity that makes graduates of a course valuable resources for current students; community building, in which honors and first-year-experience programs are deeply invested; and summative, self-reflexive critical thinking that affords students the opportunity to synthesize their experiences. Seeking such active involvement from students, however, is not an activity for the faint of heart. If you ask honors students what did and did not work in your course, and if you have created an environment in which intellectual freedom and personal integrity are rewarded, the students will tell you precisely where the holes are in your

curriculum and teaching practice; but, if you have coached them on making the transition to professional, collegiate discourse, they will tell you with some tact.

When we conclude the last class, all help take down and stack poster sheets, clean up crumbs, collect markers, and gather a single page of notes from each class member. Students say they leave exhausted and exhilarated, with a real sense of closure and of having put theory into action; they have not just read about improving college life but have had a hand in realizing change. I leave with copious documentation and a clear mandate for where to start when I revise the syllabus over the summer.

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